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When a man's partner is too close to his friends, his sex life may suffer

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Researchers have found a potential new source for sexual problems among middle-aged and older men: the relationships between their female partners and the men's closest friends.

A study published Monday, August 8, by scholars at the University of Chicago and Cornell University has found a connection between erectile dysfunction and the social networks shared by heterosexual men and their partners. They describe the situation as "partner betweenness." In such cases, a man's female partner has stronger relationships with his confidants than the man does — in effect, the romantic partner comes between the man and his friends.

"Men who experience partner betweenness in their joint relationships are more likely to have trouble getting or maintaining an erection and are also more likely to experience difficulty achieving orgasm during sex," write sociologists Benjamin Cornwell at Cornell and Edward Laumann at UChicago.

Cornwell and Laumann argue that partner betweenness undermines men's feelings of autonomy and privacy, which are central to traditional concepts of masculinity. This can lead to overt conflict or problems with partner satisfaction and attraction.

The two studied data from the National Social Life, Health, and Aging Project, a comprehensive 2005 survey by NORC at UChicago, which included 3,005 people aged 57 to 85. The results were published in an

article, "Network Position and Sexual Dysfunction: Implications of Partner Betweenness for Men," in the current issue of the *American Journal of Sociology*.

Erectile dysfunction, or ED, is common among men in the age group studied in the NSHAP. About one-third of the men in the survey experience ED, which increases as men age. Health conditions such as diabetes, heart problems and obesity can contribute to the condition, along with psychological and other factors.

The researchers took these sources of ED into account and found that even among men who were healthy and capable of having satisfying sexual relationships, there is increased risk for sexual problems when their partners have greater contact with the couple's shared friends.

"In general, while the majority of men have more contact with all of their confidants than their partners do, about 25 percent of men experience partner betweenness in at least one of their confidant relationships," said Laumann, the George Herbert Mead Distinguished Service Professor of Sociology at UChicago.

Cornwell, an assistant professor of sociology at Cornell, said the data reveal a strong association. "Partner betweenness is a significant predictor of ED: A man whose female partner has greater contact with some of his confidants than he does is about 92 percent more likely to have trouble getting or maintaining an erection than a man who has greater access than his partner does to all of his confidants."

In a surprising twist, the study found that as men age, the complications of having a partner who dominates shared confidant relationships wane. Among men in their late 50s and early 60s, the prevalence of ED more than doubles when the female partner is closer to a shared friend than the male partner is. The relationship all but disappears among men in

their 70s and 80s.

Researchers suggest it is possible that older men have a different concept of masculinity than the younger men in the survey.

"Older men's greater focus on close, kin-oriented relationships increases their likelihood of adopting new definitions of masculinity that emphasize conveying experience and mentoring rather than independence and autonomy, and under these circumstances partner betweenness is less likely to trigger erectile dysfunction," Cornwell said.

Laumann said the study shows the value of understanding the connections between social relationships and health. "The results point to the importance of social network factors that are rarely considered in medical research — network structure and the individual's position within it."

Cornwell and Laumann point out that it is generally beneficial for couples to have shared friends, who contribute to a sense of "couplehood" and provide a base of support for the relationship. Partner betweenness is an unusual situation, however.

NSHAP is a population-based study of health and social factors on a national scale. It aims to understand the well-being of older, community-dwelling Americans by examining the interactions among physical health, illness, medication use, cognitive function, emotional health, sensory function, health behaviors and social connectedness. It is by supported by the National Institutes of Health.

Provided by University of Chicago

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